



Staff Report

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTION REGARDING RESIDENTIAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Summary/Background

One of the Community Development projects on the Council's Priority Calendar for FY06-07 is the establishing of Design Guidelines for Residential Dwellings. This was an item strongly encouraged for implementation as part of the October 2005 Permit Efficiency Task Force (PETF) Recommendations. The Planning Commission ranked this issue favorably as part of their Spring 2006 review and the Council subsequently added the item to the Community Development Department list of "current" projects for commencement during the current fiscal year.

As part of the Planning Commission's Spring 2007 Priority Calendar Review, the Commission recommended consolidation of two "Below The Line" items – *Landscape Plan Review* and *Hardscape Standards* into the Design Guidelines product. Staff has no concerns with this action, as these two topics would be typically considered in the crafting of this type of policy document.

This memo seeks to educate and clarify with the Council the specific issues to be addressed as part of the Design Guidelines (scope, content, applicability). From the Council's direction at tonight's meeting, staff will move forward with an action plan for staff/consultant work efforts, stakeholder input, and preparation of such draft guidelines for consideration by the Planning Commission and adoption by the Council.

Discussion

History/Underlying Need for Design Guidelines

Belmont is a unique and desirable place to live. The city contains a favorable balance of open space and development; the natural environment is characterized by sweeping hills, woods, valleys, and creeks. It also retains a small town culture with a profound history defined by the past development of its neighborhoods. Belmont, like many other peninsula cities, grew by subdivision. Large lots were subdivided into smaller properties and individual dwellings were

constructed over a measurable period of years. The resulting residential development created an eclectic mix of differing housing style and character for Belmont's neighborhoods.

The exceptional assets found within the community create the basis for future "growing pains" in these residential neighborhoods. Because of the desirability to live in Belmont, property values have soared, fostering the pressure of potential substantial neighborhood change. That pressure is borne from the desire for bigger dwellings with updated amenities or the economic windfall in speculative development of excessively large dwellings.

As such, this has resulted in a significant amount of remodeling/expansion of single family dwellings within the community. Past construction in some cases did not reflect the style and character of the older neighborhoods. In other cases, new dwellings or additions could be considered disruptive because they did not carefully consider scale, design, exterior materials, placement on a lot, and new landscaping and/or preservation of natural features of a site. *Single Family Design Review* has resulted in improved design of new dwellings/additions; however, the need for Design Guidelines exists to assist staff, the Planning Commission, and City Council in outlining community-wide acceptable design principles/practices for residential development.

General Nature/Structure of Design Guidelines

Typically, Design Guidelines provide an overview of the Architectural Review *Purpose* and *Process* (including steps to application submittal/review, and expected timelines for such review – by staff and the Planning Commission if required). The Design Guidelines will serve as a common reference point for property owners, architects/designers, builders, staff, the Commission, and neighbors and other interested citizens. Design Guidelines are intended to assist the homeowner and designer to craft a project that moves smoothly through the development review process. Typical components of the Design Guidelines can be broken down as follows:

Identification of Neighborhood Compatibility Considerations via –

- Architectural Style and Design
- Accessory features including garages, driveways, and service areas
- Exterior Lighting
- Scale & Rhythm of the Streetscape
- "Good Neighbor" Practices

Relationship of Site/Topography to address –

- Siting a Structure
- Grading
- Vegetation
- Preservation of Natural Slopes/Trees
- Matrix/List of "preferred" or "discouraged" trees, shrubs, and groundcover plantings for landscape plans

Mass/Scale & Architectural Design of a Structure to evaluate –

- Proportion of structures to a site and associated open space
- Height and Roof lines
- Architectural Details
- Entryways
- Facades
- Accessory Structures
- Proportional Relationships
- Exterior Materials/Texture/Colors to mitigate bulk

In terms of best practices for structuring/crafting the Design Guidelines document, the following should be undertaken:

Goals/General Format:

- The guidelines should be comprehensive and easily administered while also being concise and flexible
- Topics should be contained within single pages or single page spreads
- Maintain a low word count
- Aim the level of discussion at the appropriate audience – homeowner, architect/designer, builder
- Place an emphasis on photo examples – what gets built really counts, not how the drawings/graphics are presented

Principles/Matrix:

- Organize examples into “good” and “bad” or “this” and “not that” in a consistent and intuitively understood format
- Avoid complete proscription or a mandatory tone – emphasize that these are guidelines, rather than standards/requirements – this allows for flexibility or creativity of design
- Alternatively, the guidelines could be more direct in nature to safeguard against generally accepted poor design techniques – embodying the use of a “preferred”, “discouraged”, or “prohibited” matrix
- Incorporate extensive use of captioned photos to illustrate principles

Design Guidelines often serves as a “form-based code” that links to (and ultimately clarifies) Zoning Ordinance Definitions and Development Standards/Requirements. The synthesis of words and pictures construed in a Design Guidelines document would greatly improve the way staff conveys information to the public, resulting in permit efficiency/streamlining.

Specific process/policy questions that staff seeks direction/confirmation from the Council are as follows:

- **Who should consist as the primary stakeholders and/or contributors in the crafting of the Design Guidelines?**
- **Should the members of the Permit Efficiency Task Force be reactivated (in whole or in part) to serve in a similar fashion in the drafting/review of the Design Guidelines?**
- **Should the Design Guidelines focus solely on Single/Duplex Family development, or also include multi-family residential projects/design?**
- **Staff believes ultimately that outside consultant assistance will be essential to address necessary work efforts, and text and graphics coordination to appropriately complete the Design Guidelines. Is there Council “clearance” to appropriate reasonable *Advance Planning* funds (at a Not to Exceed amount) to secure such outside consultant assistance for this project?**

Design Guidelines Examples

Staff has collected a number of adopted Design Guidelines from other California cities: Portola Valley, Los Altos Hills, Burlingame, San Mateo, Woodside, Pacific Grove, San Gabriel, Manteca, Mountain View, and Palm Desert. These documents provide excellent examples for consideration/comparison purposes in the crafting of Residential Design Guidelines for Belmont. Staff can provide copies of these various guidelines to the Council if requested.

General Plan/Vision Statement

Potential amendments to the Administrative Floor Area Exception language further the City’s General Plan Goals as follows:

Goal 1015.2

“To preserve and enhance the attractive, family-oriented and tranquil quality of Belmont’s residential neighborhoods”.

Goal 1015.4

“To maintain and enhance the appearance of the City through controlling the location, timing, design and landscaping of new development and encouraging renovation of older areas.”

Fiscal Impact

None at this time.

Public Contact

This matter was placed on the agenda and posted as required by the California Government Code.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Council review the issues in this staff report and provide direction as detailed above.

Alternatives

1. Suspend the Residential Design Guidelines Priority Calendar Project at this time.
2. Refer back to staff for additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

Carlos de Melo
Community Development Director

Jack R. Crist
City Manager

Staff Contact:

Carlos de Melo, Community Development Director

(650) 595-7440

cdemelo@belmont.gov